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# Confessions of a Ghost-Writer

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## THE CONFESSIONS OF A GHOST-WRITER

by

PETER NEMO

Nearly everything that I have read about authors seems to be absurd or untrue, and very often both. The novelists and poets who are portrayed in magazine stories, or in the movies, are utterly strange to me. And this is odd, because I have known a great many novelists and poets, and have made my living by writing for more than 20 years.

It appears that writers find it difficult to tell the truth about themselves and their profession. I do not know why this is the case. The profession of letters is no worse than law, or medicine. I see no reason why writers, even those in the lower orders of the craft, should be ashamed of it. In this book I shall change names and disguise situations so as not to embarrass my fellow-craftsmen, but the story itself is true. The experiences that I shall relate are not things that I have imagined, or read about in the newspapers. They are things which really happened, and they happened to me.

In my youth all serious writers were popularly supposed to live in New York, particularly in a certain section of the city called Greenwich Village, where they let their hair grow long and starved in garrets. Due to the mere accident of birth, I had to stay with my parents in a small Midwestern town, and eat three meals every day. There wasn't any garret in our house, and mother made me get my hair cut at regular intervals. It was all very discouraging, and I used to get pretty despondent about it at times. But I made up my mind to be a writer anyhow, despite these early handicaps.

I was sending stories to all the best magazines before I was out of high school, but the magazines always sent them back to me. When I went away to a one-horse college in New England I stopped writing for a while, and devoted my attention to pretty girls and high grades. I thought perhaps I could get a Rhodes Scholarship or a Guggenheim Fellowship, or something like that. But it was a pretty girl, a sophomore, who really started me out in the ghost-writing racket.

Betty was a Chi Omega, and one of the smartest girls on the hill, but she was a very poor student—couldn't keep her mind on her studies. I was never as intelligent as Betty, but I worked very hard in those days, and had a natural inclination to a studious life. I made straight **A's** all through my junior year, and was sure-fire, Phi Beta Kappa material.

When Betty told me that she was all set to flunk Philosophy IV I decided to see her through, since philosophy was my favorite elective and I knew old Prof. Kittredge by heart. That night I made a cram outline of the course, boiled it down to three typewritten pages, and told Betty to memorize the whole thing. Her term paper I wrote in about five hours—not the sort of paper I would have turned in myself, but the kind Betty might have written if she had studied philosophy instead of potting around with a rat-faced Phi Gam named Starbuck. I may as well break down and confess that it was a pretty slick job. I figured that Kittredge couldn't give her less than a good high **B** on the paper, and if she had any luck at all with the quiz she would rate a **C** for the course.

Believe it or not, Betty came through Philosophy IV with a **B-plus** for the semester, and the paper took an **A!** I didn't believe it myself until she showed me the slip from the Dean's office, with Kittredge's own spidery



red-ink writing on it. It must have shaken old Kittredge pretty badly too, as Betty said he still looked sort of dazed when he met her in front of the gym next day.

Betty felt pretty good about Philosophy IV, and so did I. We slipped off down to Tyler Beach the next Friday to celebrate a little, and that was the end of it so far as Betty was concerned. But things were different with me, and I realize now that it was the turning-point of my life. Not the weekend with Betty—I don't mean that at all. It was the success of Betty's paper that made me what I am today. It was the ease with which Betty slipped through Philosophy IV that turned me into a ghost-writer.

I didn't think much about this aspect of the matter at the time, being tolerably busy with my own affairs. But the next year, when I was a senior, one of Betty's sorority sisters called me up. I went around to the Chi Omega house, and we sat in a parked car down by the lake for the sake of privacy. She was a big rawboned gal named Eloise. I thought it was something about school politics that was on her mind, but I could hardly keep from laughing when she began to talk about Philosophy IV.

It seems that Betty's B-plus had made a great sensation the previous year, and everybody knows that even a C is cause for celebration among Chi Omegas. Eloise and three other dumb sisters had enrolled in Philosophy IV, assuming that it must be a snap course. When they found out their mistake, they relied on Betty to coach them through somehow. Betty cummied up until three weeks before the final exams, and then she told Eloise the truth about the cram outline and the term paper. The four poor clucks were pretty sore at Betty, and no wonder.

"It's too bad," I said to Eloise, "but I don't see that there's anything I can do about it. I had lots of time last year, and I was glad to help Betty. But it's different now. I'm graduating next month, and I've got my own exams to worry about. If you think I can stop my work now, and write four term papers, you're nuts."

"Listen, Pete," she cried, "you've got to do something. Nobody said anything about four papers. It's *me* I'm talking about. If I don't pass Philosophy IV I'm sunk. Dad'll pull me off the campus, and send me to some damned Methodist school out West."

Privately I reflected that the Methodists could have Eloise and welcome, so far as I was concerned. But I kidded her along awhile, and finally she offered to pay me \$50 for a term paper that would get her a passing mark. Fifty bucks was a lot of money to me just then, and I began to think seriously about this thing. It would never do to send Eloise up with as good a paper as Betty had, because Kittredge must know that the poor girl was incapable of writing such a paper. If a student turns in a brilliant theme and then fails to answer the simplest questions in the exam, even the dumbest prof will smell a rat. And old Kittredge was not dumb by any means. But fifty dollars! Perhaps if Eloise turned in a low C paper, and at the same time crammed enough philosophy to scratch the exam, Kittredge might pass her.

We drove back to the house, and I made Eloise show me her lecture-notes. They were absolutely the worst I ever saw, and the dates showed that she had cut class oftener than the law allows besides. She had Betty's old paper with the red A on it, and a copy of the quiz-compend. I had made for Betty the preceding year. All four of the Chi Omega dumbbells were studying this outline, since Betty had pulled it on them a few days before. Eloise had already memorized nearly half of this outline, but seemed to have very little idea what it was all about.

"Well, Eloise," I said finally, "I can write you a paper, but what about the exam? If you don't hit the exam you'll flunk the course anyway, and your fifty bucks will be wasted."



"Wasted nothing," she snapped. "If I flunk the course there won't be any fifty bucks."

"Go roll your hoop, babe," I told her. "You can't get a grade without a term paper, even if you do pass the exam. If I write the paper under this all-or-nothing set-up, I'm just betting fifty dollars that you hit the quiz. It doesn't look like a good bet to me, and I don't want any part of it. Well, good luck to you, anyhow—" and I started out of the place.

She followed me clear down the steps, with some of her silly sisters watching from behind the curtains—a thing she would never have done unless she was mighty hot about something. So we talked some more, and the end of it was that I agreed to do the paper for \$25 in advance, with another \$25 to come in case Eloise wriggled through Philosophy IV without a condition.

The first thing I did was to look up Rosa Bierbaum and borrow her notes on Philosophy IV. Rosa lived in a cheap place uptown, very different from the Chi Omega house. Rosa's clothes weren't nearly as good as those worn by Eloise, but her notes were infinitely better—every lecture summarized, all typed out in a fine loose-leaf binder. Rosa was what we called a greasy grind in those days.

Twenty minutes with Rosa's notebook showed me that Kittredge was using the same material as last year except that he had added a lot of dope on Pragmatism. Pragmatism was still new in those days, and Kittredge was violently opposed to it. More than one-tenth of the course, according to Rosa's notes, was devoted to lambasting William James and the plausible new "philosophy that works."

That night I sat down and sweated out a 300-word paragraph entitled "What Pragmatism Is," and later boiled this down to about half a page, phrased in the kindergarten English that was all poor Eloise knew. Then I did another half-page of critical stuff on pragmatism, with two original wisecracks calculated to please old Kittredge. "Learn this page by heart, so you can recite the whole thing," I told Eloise next day. "And if the word **pragmatism** or the name **William James** appears in the examination topic, write this stuff down as is, whether it makes sense or not. If you do this, and also memorize the outline you got from Betty, I believe you'll pass Kittredge's exam."

The term paper was supposed to be a 5,000-word summary of the whole course, including all of the assigned readings. I pasted this up from a carbon of my own resume of two years before, with a new section on pragmatism, including the two wisecracks that Eloise was to memorize. Then I went through the whole thing and put in the errors and bad grammar that Kittredge would expect from Eloise. I typed this myself on some silly tinted paper, and made careful notes for some corrections which Eloise added with violet ink in her childish handwriting. Poor Eloise worked pretty hard on the outline, and I told her that everything looked rosy, but the truth is that I had little hope of getting that second 25 bucks. The paper would pass, I thought, but I didn't see how Eloise could possibly scrape through any sort of an examination. I had done everything I could, however, so I dismissed the whole business from my mind and turned back to my own affairs.

Some two weeks later I met Eloise in the entrance to Triffet Hall, and she was all smiles. "Did you hear about it?" she cried. When I said no, she told me that Kittredge had given her a **B** in Philosophy IV, and had flunked her three sisters who tried to write their own papers. That **B** was the highest grade Eloise ever got, in her entire three years at college. I learned later that there were only five questions in Kittredge's exam, and that two of them dealt with pragmatism. Eloise gave me a check for 25 smackers, and threw in a kiss for good measure. I didn't think much of the kiss, but



was very glad to get the money. It was the first job of the sort that I had ever been paid for, and I was much pleased with myself. As for the ethical aspect of the thing, I never gave it a thought.

## II.

I got my B. A. *cum laude* that year, and a Phi Beta Kappa key, but somehow failed to land the juicy fellowship that would have covered all my expenses for a year of graduate work. The best job I could get was a half-time instructorship, which paid only \$100 a month, for nine month's work. But this would allow me to stay in school and take a master's degree, which might lead up to something better in time. So I stayed on at the college, and became an instructor in the School of Education.

One of my duties in the new job was the grading of papers, which was a serious matter at the time. The true-and-false type of quiz was a new thing then, and the whole educational set-up was much less mechanical than it is nowadays. Although I was now, by courtesy at least, a member of the faculty, my viewpoint was still that of a student. It amused me to figure out ways of beating the exams.

I did not complete the work for my M.A. that year, but I held down the part-time job all right, and by tutoring and ghosting papers on the side I earned \$1,500—nearly \$600 more than the college paid me. I decided to resign the assistant job and devote all my time to ghosting, except what was necessary to finish the work for my master's degree. It had always been my intention to become a teacher, but I began to think that perhaps tutors and ghosts made more money. I happened to know that some full-time instructors with Ph.D.s were getting less money than I could make by tutoring and writing papers, if I were free to devote my entire time to this kind of work.

The problem I was working out for my M.A. was really a good one, and after several months of work old Dr. Jaeger, the head of our department, found out that somebody at the University of Wisconsin was engaged along the same line. Because of this, he suggested that we publish a preliminary report of the work done to date, in order to establish a sort of priority. It would be awkward, he said, if my work should be duplicated elsewhere and published before my master's thesis was complete—it would make me look like an imitator. So I dropped everything else and prepared the paper he suggested. It was published in the *Educational Review*, and was the first writing of mine that ever appeared in print.

Professional journals like the *Review* do not pay for contributions, of course, but that article over my name pleased me more than any amount of money could have done. I was a marked man on our little campus, and even full professors and department heads stopped me in the street and complimented me about it. It was the first recognition of the sort that had ever come my way, and I began to feel that I must be quite a fellow. Perhaps it would be better, I reflected, for me to become a professional writer instead of a tutor. Everybody seemed to think that writers were the hot stuff, while school-teachers were rather looked down upon. A writer could travel about the country and live as he liked, while a teacher had to stay on the campus at least nine months of the year. More money in writing, too, according to what I read about Robert W. Chambers and others in the newspapers. I wrote some little items for the college paper, signed with my initials, and the editor printed nearly all of them. No money in this, of course, but it pleased me. I tried some verses, too, but soon decided that this was not my field.

There was an old newspaper man named MacDougal in a nearby city, who wrote very fine feature articles for the Sunday paper. I went to see



this man, and he told me that he made about \$100 a week plus his traveling expenses. Impressed by this intelligence, I tried to write feature stories myself, but didn't have much luck with them. Finally I did sell one to a New York paper for \$75, and this gave me hope to go on. I neglected my tutoring shamefully, and turned down several opportunities to write term papers for cash, because I was so pleased at selling that one feature to a big paper in New York. I sent clippings of that story to my friends back home, and many of them advised me to go down to New York at once, never doubting that I would be a successful feature-writer in a short time.

Meanwhile I had been cultivating old MacDougal, and showed him some of the features I had been unable to sell in New York. He said that he liked several of the stories very much, and gave me some valuable pointers about writing. I realize now that my stories were really unconscious imitations of Mac's own style, since I had been reading his stuff for years. I suppose that's why Mac thought they were good.

One day Mac phoned me to come to his home, suggesting that I bring the stories with me. When I got there the old man was sick in bed. He came to the point at once. "Look, Pete," said he, "I may be laid up here for weeks, and I've got to turn something in to the paper. Suppose I polish up three of your best features—rewrite 'em a little, you know—and pass 'em off as my stuff? They'll be printed over my name, of course, but I'll pay you \$25 apiece."

It looked like a break for me. I had already peddled those features all over the country with no takers anywhere, and had regarded them as a total loss. It rather tickled my vanity to think that my stories were good enough for the great MacDougal to sign, and the \$75 was pure velvet. "Sure, Mac," I told him, "and glad of the chance. I'm not kidding myself that my stuff is in the same class with yours, but if you think your boss won't know the difference it's OK by me."

Mac said that he would "touch 'em up a bit" and add his characteristic wisecrack ending, but he didn't. I watched the paper very carefully, and the yarns were printed almost exactly as I had written them, except that they were shortened a little to fit Mac's page. The stories are damned good, I said to myself. The editors wouldn't buy them because they had never heard of me—it's big names they want. That's why it required Mac's prestige to make the sale. It was no time at all until I convinced myself that I was just as good a writer as MacDougal, and maybe better.

Mac was up and around in a few weeks, but the way my stuff went over impressed him. "I've been in this business a long time, Pete," he said to me, "but this is the first time anybody ever did any ghosting for MacDougal. For God's sake don't tell anybody," he added. "If the gang ever found out I was calling in college boys to write my stuff, I'd never hear the last of it."

Several times after that Mac bought feature stories from me, and sometimes he rewrote them almost past recognition. On two or three occasions he paid for stories that he did not publish at all, so far as I could find out. He was getting pretty old then, and one day I read in the paper that he had died suddenly somewhere in Pennsylvania. Mac was a good fellow, who encouraged me at a time when I needed encouragement.

After MacDougal's passing I hurried back to my tutoring and cramming, which activities paid much better than ghosting newspaper stories, anyway. I once thought seriously of going to Mac's editors and telling them that I had been writing Mac's best stuff for months, but decided against this course, partly because Mac had sworn me to secrecy and partly because I didn't think they'd give me the job anyway. Another consideration was that I still had my M.A. thesis to finish; although I had by this time given up



the idea of being a teacher, it seemed foolish not to take my degree after having almost completed the work required for it.

Well, I got the degree all right, but without any particular honors—not at all what was expected of a man who had taken his B.A. *cum laude*. The ceremony impressed me at the time. "... the degree of Master of Arts, with all rights, honors and privileges to that degree appertaining," the Chancellor droned as he handed me the parchment. Just what these "rights, honors and privileges" are I wondered at the time, and I am still wondering. When the fol-de-rol was over I bought beer for a lot of other Masters of Arts and a few Doctors of Philosophy, as was the custom in those days. By the end of Commencement Week I was broke, so I took my Master's gown back to the fellow I had rented it from, and started out to find a job.

I didn't have much hope of getting any term papers to write at that time, since the Summer School was just opening. Most of the summer students were school-teachers who had little money and hence wrote their own papers. But the second day after enrollment I ran across a high-school principal who was trying to get an M.A. in psychology. The head of the psychology department had talked him into doing a thesis entitled "The Behavioristic Psychology of John B. Watson." The gospel of Watsonism was a new thing then, and few pedagogues had any idea what it was about.

A master's degree was important to a schoolmaster in those days, rather more important than a Ph.D. is at present. The candidate had first to show that he had taken a bachelor's degree from an accredited college. Then he must satisfy the department head that he possessed a "reading knowledge" of French and German. Next he must do a full year of graduate class-work, take a final examination, and submit a satisfactory thesis.

This poor fellow had done all the class-work except five college-hours, which he could clean up this Summer, but he had written only 10,000 words of his thesis, which should be about 20,000 words in length. He thought I was quite a fellow, partly because of my Phi Beta Kappa key and partly because he had come up for Commencement and seen me strutting about in my Master's gown. I showed him my article in the *Educational Review*, and his eyes stuck out like door-knobs. When I told him that for \$100 I would finish up his thesis and guarantee it to pass old Chisholm, he acted as if he were about to fall on my neck. This would give him ample time, he said, to complete his class-work and cram for the exam in August.

I was a little shaky about this job at first, for after all I had never written any master's thesis save my own, and that had been built up gradually over two full academic years. Perhaps in agreeing to do 10,000 words of dissertation for \$100 I had over-reached myself a bit. But when I looked over the part of the thesis that was already done I felt much more confident. It was a good solid piece of work, really complete as it was. I decided to precede this by a kind of historical introduction which I called "The Philosophical Antecedents of Behaviorism," working in references to all the mechanistic and materialistic writers from Democritus down to Jacques Loeb. It was easy enough to pad this section to 5,000 words. I got nearly 1,000 out of Auguste Comte alone.

The next thing was to assemble an extensive bibliography in which I listed every book and article on behaviorism that had been published at that time. This was easily done, because the material was all translated, summarized and indexed in the bound copies of the *Psychological Bulletin* filed in the college library. To give the thing more bulk I added all the titles to which reference was made in my historical introduction, and this brought the length up to the 20,000 words which we had decided upon as adequate.

The poor schoolman was a bit alarmed when he saw this gigantic



bibliography, because the candidate for the M.A. is supposed to have read every book mentioned in his thesis. This fellow had read a lot of them, but not all by any means. "Good Lord!" he cried. "What if Dr. Chisholm should ask me about this stuff in the exam?" That was not likely, I thought, but we went over the list and cut out several titles that seemed particularly frightening. Then we called in a typist to copy the whole thing on good paper with very wide margins, and had both the original and the carbon bound according to the regulations of the Graduate Faculty. If the candidate is granted the degree he is required to leave a bound copy of the thesis in the school library. If he fails to get his degree the thesis is returned to him "for his own purposes"—which means, according to a university tradition, that he is supposed to use it for toilet-paper.

As the time approached for the examinations I was almost as nervous as the candidate, and felt obliged to plead poverty so as to collect half of my fee before the exam. I was afraid that if the thesis were rejected, or if he somehow flunked the final exam, I might not be able to get my money. It was a grand and glorious feeling when I learned that he had passed with flying colors, and that old Chisholm complimented him especially on the thesis. The poor fellow was almost hysterical with relief to find himself a Master of Arts, and assured me that he would mention my labors in confidence to some friends of his, who were also anxious to take graduate degrees.

About this time I tried very hard to get a job with Mac's old editor, but was unable to do so, although he was willing to buy features from me occasionally. I was offered a position as teacher in a small high-school, but the combination of hard work and small pay did not appeal to me, and there seemed to be very little chance for advancement. I had several hundred dollars in the bank, and finally decided to cut my living expenses to the bone, and try to spend another year at the college. This time, however, I would enroll only in one or two graduate courses, and devote most of my time to writing features which I hoped to sell to the city newspapers. If this attempt failed I would still be a graduate student in residence, with an M.A. degree and a Phi Beta Kappa key. Thus equipped, I should at least be able to pick up odd jobs of tutoring, writing cram outlines or term papers, and perhaps I might even turn out two or three master's theses. My experience with the school principal convinced me that I could do this sort of work all right, but I determined that hereafter I should demand at least \$250 from each candidate for the M.A., and that one-half of this amount must be paid in advance.

The tutoring and cram outline part of my work was all open and above-board—anybody has a right to set himself up as a tutor. But this business of writing term papers and theses is against all rules everywhere. I knew that if I should be caught at it the authorities would chase me off the campus, and expel my clients. For this reason I tried to advertise the tutoring and coaching stuff, and keep the rest very quiet. Without any official permission, I even used one of the college lecture-rooms for my cram-class, in order to add a kind of respectability to the enterprise. Several of the profs knew all about this, but they never said anything. Some students came to regard me as a sort of ex-officio member of the faculty, and began to call me "Professor Pete."

I soon realized that I could coach three or four students as easily as one, so long as they wrote their own term papers, since the same outline served for everybody enrolled in the same course. If I had started this at a big college instead of a little one I should probably have ended up running a regular crammer's institute, like the famous ones at Cambridge Mass. These professional crammers are better paid than many college instructors, and some of them have more pedagogical ability. Somebody



showed a Harvard professor an outline of his own lectures, prepared by one of the Cambridge crammers. He studied it very carefully. "Do you know," he said slowly, "I believe that fellow is a better teacher than I am!"

If I had stuck to tutoring I'd have been there yet, I suppose, but there was more money in term papers and theses, and I couldn't let well enough alone in those days. I wrote three master's theses in one semester, and several term papers besides. I even farmed out several term papers, and hired other graduate students to help when I had taken on a job that proved too much for me.

Some gossip about this got out in time, of course, and it wasn't long until I realized that I was getting in bad with the faculty. My clients began to get stiffer oral exams, and their term papers were examined much more carefully than had been the case in the past. Even students who were not my clients at all were suspected of using faked papers, and it was said that a certain fraternity paid me \$1,000 a year to insure that no member flunked in any subject! When the Dean of Women made an extraordinary speech in chapel one day, some campus comedians pretended to believe that "Professor Pete" must have ghosted it for her, and some such reference even found its way into the college daily. Not one of the professors ever mentioned this to me, but I realized that I was on my way out so far as that particular college was concerned.

Just at this critical period some sophomores invented a new system of cribbing—or rather adapted it from a method gamblers used in marking playing-cards with a special sort of ink. This ink was invisible to the naked eye, but showed up plainly when viewed through a particular kind of tinted spectacles. By using this system a student could carry a detailed outline of an entire course into the classroom, and spread it right out before him while he took the examination. It looked like a sheet of blank paper of any casual observer, but the student who wore the specially prepared "cheaters" could read it without difficulty. It was said that one bespectacled girl had been caught with a whole outline of English VII written on the side of a white leather purse.

I knew nothing of this cribbing business, until it was discovered by an instructor in the English department, but several of the students involved were clients of mine, and it seemed likely that I would be held responsible for the whole thing. I was about through with old Alma Mater anyhow, and this was the last straw. I packed my trunk that night, and took the early morning train down to New York.

### III.

I had long believed that most New York writers lived in the Village, but I knew some people at the old Union Square hotel, on 14th Street, and it was more convenient for me to stop there at first. This hotel was at that time a sort of headquarters for political radicals of one kind and another—Socialists, Syndicalists, Communists, Anarchists and members of the Industrial Workers of the World, this latter group being popularly known as Wobblies. Many of these radicals were writers of a sort, and some of them interested me very much. Even more interesting were the girls from a nearby burlesque house; I have forgotten the name of this theatre, but it was just around the corner, and most of the performers stopped at the Union Square Hotel.

Since I had money enough to live for several months I decided to spend a couple of weeks in looking about the city before trying to find a job. I was not accustomed to subways and did not like them, but the 5th Avenue buses suited me exactly. I didn't mind walking in those days, either, and covered a great part of the city on foot. I found numerous



places where food seemed cheap, and believed that it would be possible for me to live economically in New York.

I had intended to move down into the Village as soon as possible, but after meeting some of the villagers I decided against it. There were some able writers and painters there, of course, but I had no way of getting acquainted with these people. I met a lot of long-haired fellows who sat around and drank red wine, talking about literature and "free love." What they said about literature seemed nonsensical to me, even worse than the lectures I had heard at college. And as for free love, there was certainly more sexual freedom at that little up-country college than in the Village, so far as I could see. What these long-haired fellows regarded as very "advanced" talk was kindergarten stuff compared to old Prof. Hankins' lectures back home. Some of the Village radicals seemed to think it was very daring to live openly with women to whom they were not legally married. But plenty of people in my home town were satisfied with common-law marriages—even those who raised big families and sent their children to the college. I couldn't see anything startling or romantic about it.

There was one fellow who was introduced as a novelist, a big handsome fellow who talked like an Englishman and wore Greek sandals. He seemed a cut above most of the Villagers, and everybody seemed to think he was such a celebrity that I decided to read some of his books. But when I went to buy them I learned that the big book stores had never heard of the great writer! I looked farther and found that he was in the telephone book, but not in *Who's Who*. I called up the Author's League, but they had no record of him. Finally I found a little paper-bound book with his name on it, in the New York Public Library. It was very poor stuff, I thought, except for a few startling paragraphs which seemed to be stolen from Frank Harris's *The Bomb*. It appeared that the celebrity in the sandals had published this book at his own expense some seven years previously, and had written nothing since!

Believe it or not, I met "writers" in the Village who had never published anything at all, so far as I could find out. I met "poets" who had written nothing but miserable little pamphlets of *vers libre* which they had printed themselves, and peddled about the cafes and studios for 25c a copy. I met "journalists" who had never sold a line to a reputable journal in their lives. These fellows did nothing at all, apparently, but drink red wine and talk about literature. Many of them lived on tiny incomes which they had inherited, or money which they mooched from their relatives. Some were pimps, others lived by petty fraud or cheap thievery of one sort or another. A few, I believe, were real criminals—sneak thieves, small-time burglars, purse-snatchers and the like.

I don't mean to say that there were no genuine writers in the Village in those days—what I mean to say is that I didn't meet any of them. One fellow that I saw once in Romany Marie's was the real thing—an explorer who wrote several fine books about Eskimos and the like. It was said that Lincoln Steffens, Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis visited friends below Washington Square sometimes, but I never met these gentlemen until many years later. I did see two or three authentic third-rate novelists in the cafes, but they lived elsewhere and came to the Village for purposes unconnected with their literary labors.

Since the Villagers that I was able to meet did not appeal to me, I began to cultivate the Union Square radicals and found them vastly more interesting. Some of these fellows seemed to be genuine revolutionists, very different from the so-called "radicals" of the Village, and very different also from the "pinks" that I had known at college. Many of the Union Square boys were of foreign descent, and this interested me, because most of my associates up to this time had been old-stock Americans. At the meetings



I attended on 14th Street it was not unusual to hear four or five different languages spoken in one evening, to say nothing of half-a-dozen different brands of broken English.

The only foreign language that I knew anything about was German, which I had studied in high school and college. I was never able to speak German, but I could understand a good deal, and read it well enough to enjoy certain German newspapers, which seemed much easier than the books I had read in college. Most of the German I heard in New York was really Yiddish—a mixture of bad German with a sprinkling of Slav, English and Hebrew words. I found that I could understand quite a bit of this jargon, but made no attempt to read the Yiddish papers because they were printed in Hebrew characters. It seemed strange to me that this broken German dialect should make use of the ancient Hebrew letters, and I said as much to a Jewish girl. "What's funny about it?" she demanded. "You use the old Roman alphabet to write English, don't you?"

One day a little Russian named Mottke showed me that while the letters were Hebrew and must be read from right to left in the Oriental fashion, the words were mostly German and English, such as I heard around me every day. "All you got to do, if you want to read Yiddish, is to learn the alphabet, because Yiddish is all spelled by sound absolutely, so you can't go wrong like in the *verdammt* English." Mottke cut the Hebrew characters out of his newspaper and pasted them on a card, with the corresponding English letters written opposite each, so I soon learned to spell out many newspaper headlines, and some of the signs in Jewish stores. I got a great kick out of this, and the very slight knowledge of Yiddish that I acquired then has given me more pleasure than all the scraps of Latin and Greek that I learned so painfully in college.

It was through my good comrade Mottke that I got my first writing job in New York. One of Mottke's many cousins was a member of a new publishing firm, and he wanted to buy a book-length manuscript from a fellow called Too-Frantic—that's not his real name, but a nickname bestowed upon him by Mottke. Too-Frantic has since become a very successful writer, and pretends nowadays that he does not remember me at all, but he was not so *hochnasig* at that time. He came from one of the Balkan countries, and had lived in various parts of Europe, but his English was so bad that not many Americans could talk with him. It was mostly a matter of pronunciation, however, for he could read English easily and wrote much better than he could speak. He said that he had learned the English tongue at "a very high college in *Bra-how*"—by which he meant to say Prague.

Too-Frantic's book dealt with the Americanization of an immigrant—all about the difficulties and problems of a "greenhorn" in New York. The book was packed with anecdotes and personal experiences, sincere and vivid. Too-Frantic had written it in his native language and then painstakingly translated it into English. The manuscript ran more than 100,000 words, and Mottke's cousin wanted it reduced to about 80,000. Most of all he wanted it put into more readable American English, but in such a way as to preserve the charm of the author's heroic struggle with an alien tongue. I rewrote two or three pages to show how I thought it should be done, and agreed to do the whole job for \$250, plus the cost of typing the final copy.

Mottke said that I should have held out for at least \$500, but I was delighted to get the job at any price, reflecting that many really good writers have been unable to get any work at all in New York. In one evening I blue-pencilled enough of Too-Frantic's winged words to shorten the manuscript as the publisher desired, and then called the typist to copy the whole thing on letter-size newsprint, with at least half of each page



left blank for revision. This took her nearly a week, and the publisher complained loudly, but it was finally done to my satisfaction. It has always seemed to me best to write only one paragraph on each page, in the first draft of any lengthy work. This not only makes it easy to shift paragraphs from one place to another in the manuscript, but leaves plenty of space for my changes and interpolations in pencil.

I rewrote Too-Frantic's book in about four weeks, and when the final copy was typed it satisfied the publisher and he paid me. But when it was shown to Too-Frantic, he was not satisfied by any means. "Oh Lord God Jesus!" he cried in anguish. "These Yankee-have ruined all!" Finally the publisher asked me to go over the manuscript with the outraged author, and try to make such small changes as would pacify him. I tried to tell Too-Frantic that not one page of his work had been really changed. The English he learned in **Bra-how**, I told him, is not intelligible to the people of the United States. "If the book were published exactly as you wrote it," I said, "it would be necessary to put in hundreds of footnotes to explain the meaning of words and sentences which are not known to American readers. People in America will not buy a book unless it is easy to read. Therefore the publisher asked me to translate it into the common speech of the people who are expected to read it."

"Translate! Translate!" Too-Frantic yelled at the top of his voice. "How could you translate when she is in English language already? I have **myself** translate him! Two years hard work I sweat! So now comes you, Meester, and what you do? You make me, who am the artist, talk like I am the barber, the policemen, the base-baller, the loafer, the boom! Oh Lord God Jesus—" and here Too-Frantic took off into his own language, where I could not follow him. And maybe it was just as well.

The only thing that reconciled Too-Frantic, I think, was the fact that several chapters of his book were sold at once to a very popular magazine. It seems that he had been offering the manuscript chapter by chapter to various periodicals for several years, with no success. But immediately after my revision to the publisher (or perhaps it was Too-Frantic's agent) sold part of the book to this magazine, and turned several hundred dollars over to the author at once. This apparently convinced Too-Frantic that my colloquial English was better than his, and he admitted as much to me. But as I look back on the matter now, it seems that there really was a wild, unearthly charm about Too-Frantic's original story that faded considerably in my more idiomatic "translation."

Shortly after Too-Frantic's stuff was sold to the magazine, one of his girl-friends brought me some verses to be "Americanized." Poetry is a bit out of my line, but it seemed to me that this stuff was terrible. I told Leah that verse is always hard to sell, and even if she did manage to sell it the price would be low. But Leah lived on alimony and she was doing all right financially. She said that money didn't matter in the least, but that she was inspired to write verses, and liked to read them to her friends. Some day, if she ever got enough rhymes to make a book, she was going to have them published in that form. But she understood perfectly that she couldn't expect to make any money out of it.

I did the best I could for Leah, but I don't believe I improved her verses very much. They were bad verses to start with, and they were still bad when I finished patching them. It was only a few days, however, until Leah called me. She had sold two of her poems—one of them to a very good magazine, she said. I had only charged her \$25 for my work, but now realized that I might as well have had \$50. It was good advertising for me, especially after Too-Frantic's success. But Leah's verses were still bad verses, and I have never been able to understand how she found such a good market for them.



Leah brought me some more verse for revision, and one of her chums came along with two pretty good short stories. This friend's name was Annette, and it seemed to me that there was nothing I could do to help her work. Certainly the stories were "American" enough, but they were not the sort of stories that interest me. She said that all the editors in New York had turned them down, but she was confident that my "magic touch" would make them saleable at once, just as had been the case with Leah's verses and Too-Frantic's book. Well—the money would come in handy, so when Annette insisted that I rewrite the stories I told her that I would do my best. I put more than a week's hard work on Annette's two stories, but she was never able to sell them. She didn't pay me for the revision, either—at least not in cash.

After a few more little jobs of this sort, I went to see Too-Frantic's publisher and inquired if he had any more work for me. He did not, but he was a pleasant fellow, and gave me some good advice. If I wanted to make a business of ghosting and collaboration, he said, I would have to write something myself and get it published over my own name. "If you can get just one of your stories into the *Saturday Evening Post*, and sell another to some highbrow magazine like *The Atlantic Monthly* or *The American Mercury*, you can get all the ghost jobs you want. You ought to publish at least one book, too," he added as an afterthought.

I thanked the man and walked slowly back to 14th Street, reflecting upon the stupidity and ignorance of people who should know better. Here was Mottke's cousin, himself a publisher, who must be personally acquainted with many successful writers, and should know all about this literary business. And yet he talked such foolishness! Why, if I could write a story that made the *Saturday Evening Post*, would I idle away my time with these ghost jobs? If I were so good as all that, I'd just sit down and write more stories for the *Post*! As for the so-called highbrow magazines, I had never even thought of sending them any of my stuff, feeling that they were altogether out of my class. I had considered writing a book, but it would have been merely a textbook for use in high-schools, or perhaps only a lab manual or a quiz-compend like those authored by some of the profs I had known in college. I was not over-burdened with modesty in those days, but I knew that I lacked the inner fire that makes for originality in writing. I was a good student and a competent craftsman, but the little spark wasn't there. I laughed at poor Too-Frantic because of his difficulties with the English tongue, but I realized that he was the real thing, while I was only a glib schoolmaster gone astray.

The man's words stuck in my mind, nevertheless, and doubtless influenced my literary thinking later on. After all, he was an editor and a publisher. And he saw nothing ridiculous in the idea that I might contribute stories to the most popular magazines in America, or even aspire to have a book published. It would bear thinking about.

#### IV.

One of this publisher's early projects was a book to be written by a famous "society lady," as he told me. "She's writing the book now, and I want you to go and help her get the manuscript into shape." When I finally located the woman she was living in a ramshackle cottage down on Long Island. She was fat and in poor health and pretty hard up—not at all the sort of society woman that one reads about in the Sunday newspapers. But she bore the same name as a woman who really was socially prominent, and whose family had been leaders of New York Society for several generations. "The famous Mrs. Van Astorbilt is a distant relative. Her husband and mine were fourth cousins, I believe," the fat woman told me. "I have



not seen her since she was a little girl. But the name is my own, and I have papers to prove it."

The publisher had agreed to pay this woman \$1,000 advance and a 10 percent royalty for a 60,000-word book entitled **What I Know About Etiquette**, with the understanding that he would send an experienced "secretary" to help her write the book. She told me quite frankly that she couldn't possibly write anything herself, but that she would "examine and correct" the manuscript, and would sign it according to her contract with the publisher. In the meantime, she intimated pleasantly but firmly, it would be best not to bother her with details.

Back at the hotel I pondered this business for some time. How could I possibly write a book on etiquette? I had never even seen any society people, unless the well-dressed folk in the boxes at theatres were socialites. What did I know of ladies and gentlemen, and how they conducted themselves? The work I did with Too-Frantic was really a collaboration, since he wrote the stuff and I merely revised it, but this etiquette business was genuine ghost-writing. It was just like the term papers I had ghosted in college, except that the term papers dealt with subjects of which I had some knowledge. But etiquette—I doubt if there was a single literate American in all New York who knew less about etiquette than I.

I went to see the publisher, and told him all this. "Look, Pete," he said, "that's just the point. If a fellow like you writes this book, he'll keep it down to earth. Who do you think buys etiquette books? Not rich people, or society people, but poor folks who ain't in society. Mostly women, the wives of fellows like you and me. They don't want to know whether to say 'Your Highness' to dukes, they want to know which fork to eat oysters with, and things like that. You can write this book better than Mrs. Van Astorbilt could possibly do it. It will be good experience for you, and also I will pay you \$75 a week."

It still looked like a tough assignment to me, but I went down to a secondhand bookstore and bought three popular works on etiquette. One of these—by far the poorest one, I thought—was a best seller and had made a great deal of money. Studying these books, I worked out a list of topics to be treated in my own presentation of the subject. This done, I read carefully what each author had to say about the first item on my list, and jotted down the fundamental facts upon which my three great authorities were agreed.

Two of the three books seemed very much alike in spots, and it was obvious that one had been copied in part from the other. There was no such slavish imitation in the book that I was writing, since every sentence of it was expressed in my own way and not copied from anyone else's work. But it is certainly true that I got all the facts about etiquette from books that had already been published. Where else could I get such information? Despite a popular impression to the contrary, there is nothing illegal or unethical about this. Fiction belongs to the man that invents it, but facts are public property. In other words, lies can be protected by copyright, but truth is in the public domain.

It took me nearly two months to grind out the required 60,000 words about etiquette, and it was the most exasperating job I ever tackled. But finally I got it all typed out on legal-size paper with very wide margins, expecting that the "society lady" would need plenty of space for her corrections and addenda. She kept the manuscript about a week, but made no changes at all, so far as I could see when I read the proof. She told the publisher that it was very good indeed, and even came uptown to autograph books for the customers in one of the big bookstores. I still have the copy she sent me, with a patronizing inscription on the flyleaf.

**What I Know About Etiquette** sold very well for a while, and the



"author" went about lecturing to women's clubs, and even ran a column of questions and answers about etiquette in a newspaper. The publisher told me that the old girl got so that she really believed she had written the book, and threatened to do another work on the same subject for a rival publishing house. My labors in this field seem to have satisfied everybody concerned, but I always felt a bit sheepish about it myself. I decided not to attempt any more writing on subjects so alien to my tastes and training.

There was no denying, however, that the book had made a lot of money for Mottke's cousin the publisher. It was making a considerable sum for Mrs. Van Astorbilt, too, since her 10 percent royalty would be coming in regularly for several years yet. But as for me, the poor chump who really wrote the book I got only \$560 in cash and no credit at all, since I was not at liberty to tell anybody that I had written it. Of course, \$560 was good pay for less than two months work, but still it was pretty small potatoes compared to what the "author" was pulling down, and she had done no work at all. The publisher was entitled to his cut, I reasoned, because he had risked his capital and would have taken a heavy loss if the book had failed to sell. Besides it was the publisher who had first thought up the idea, and it is fair enough that a man should reap the benefit of his originality. But why should a fat woman on Long Island get thousands of dollars, just because her name happened to be similar to that of some other fat woman who was prominent in society?

## V.

While I was pondering these matters, a friend introduced me to a Flatbush girl named Billingsgate, who had sold some verses to **Everybody's Magazine**. This girl had written a novel entitled **The Seed Grows Cold**, which had been rejected by nearly every publisher in New York. She told me about the story, and I answered that I knew several publishers personally. "If this book is as good as you think, maybe I can place it for you," I told her. She gave me the manuscript and I sat up nearly all night reading it. I thought then that it was one of the finest novels ever written in America. Next morning I took it down to Mottke's cousin and told him what I thought.

"Yeah," he said, "we had it here in the office once. I liked it, and so did my wife. But it would never sell. Too morbid. And this Billingsgate gal ain't had any build-up. Books like that never sell unless there's a big name on 'em, like Rupert Hughes or maybe Joseph Hergesheimer."

Well, how can you argue with a man who talks like that? But it is a mistake to assume that publishers don't know what the public will buy, because that's the one thing that publishers **do** know. They have to know that, or they don't remain publishers very long.

I urged this fellow to give the girl a contract, and then hire me to rewrite the novel, just as I had Too-Frantic's book. He shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, but it ain't the same thing at all," he said. "Too-Frantic's book was OK except for his broken English. You can fix broken English, but you can't turn a morbid high-brow novel into a best seller. I've seen it tried. Believe me, Pete, I know what you can do and what you can't, better than you know yourself."

It seemed to me that the publisher was wrong about this, and the more I thought about the matter the more certain it appeared that **The Seed Grows Cold** was a truly great novel. Surely it was far better than Too-Frantic's book or the Van Astorbilt manual of etiquette, and both of these books were money-makers. The Billingsgate girl had no cash, but I told her that it didn't matter. I offered to revise the manuscript and find a publisher for it, without any advance payment at all, if she would split the royalties



50-50. She wouldn't hear of this at first, but after a week of debate she signed a contract which gave me 50 percent of all royalties until I had received a total of \$1,000, and 25 percent of royalties thereafter—this expressly including payment for serial and motion-picture rights.

Well, to make a long story short, I worked on that novel for four months, and then the author and I spent another month wrangling over it together. It seemed to us that the resulting manuscript had all the elements of a really great novel, and was at the same time sensational enough to become a best seller. I carried it around myself to all the foremost publishers in America, and I am sure that in most of these offices it was read by the big shots themselves, and by their best readers. Without exception they turned it down. Two or three hesitated a bit, but they all rejected it in the end. Not only the book publishers, but the editors of all the best magazines as well. I kept on peddling the manuscript about the town for more than two years, but finally admitted that Mottke's cousin was right and gave up the effort. It was a great blow to me, and I have never had the same confidence in my literary judgment since.

Miss Billingsgate married an engineer and went to South America, and I have heard nothing of her for a long time. Probably she gave up writing as a bad job years ago. I still believe that she might have become a novelist of the first rank, greater than any woman writer who has yet appeared in the United States. I still have a carbon copy of **The Seed Grows Cold**, and I still think it is one of the greatest stories ever written in this country. I realize now, however, that it could never have been a best seller, for the same reason that the novels of James Branch Cabell have never been best sellers.

It is because of this experience that I have been content to earn my living as a ghost and anonymous hack, and have never tried to write serious fiction under my own power. I believe that I could turn out some pretty fair stories, but I know that I could never write anything as good as **The Seed Grows Cold**. And even if I should succeed in producing such a work, the publishers wouldn't print it. And even if some publisher should print it, the public wouldn't like it and would not buy it. When a man's taste in literature (or in anything else) varies so widely from the average or "normal" taste, he will do well to keep his eccentric preferences to himself. We live in a democratic era, the Voice of the People is the Voice of God, and the Customer is Always Right.

## VI.

As a reaction from the failure of **The Seed Grows Cold** I went on a drunken party with some magazine people, and it was there that I met Mrs. Mahala Featherstonhaugh—pronounced Fanshaw. Shortly after this I ghosted an outlandish article for Mahala, a story of her adventures in the South Sea Islands where she had been captured by cannibals. She really had lived in the South Seas with one of her husbands, who was a medical missionary, and I believe that her story was mostly true. I tried to get her to sign it "as told to Peter Nemo," but Mahala wouldn't hear of this. She insisted on having it appear over her name alone, and told all her friends that she had written it herself.

The story sold immediately to a sensational weekly, and a few months later one of the biggest studios in Hollywood bought the movie rights. Not only that, but they offered Mahala a job on the lot. She was to get \$350 a week to help write the screen play. The job would last only a month or so, and the money was not important to Mahala who was rich anyhow, but the idea of being a professional scenarist in a major studio gave her a great thrill. She would meet a lot of famous actors—John Barrymore, and William S. Hart, and perhaps even the great Adolph Menjou himself! The first thing Mahala did was to buy herself a lot of new clothes. The



fact that she had never written anything did not seem to worry her at all. It was this latter phenomenon that interested me, and I asked some of her close friends about it. "How did Mahala expect to pass herself off as a writer?" Well, it seems that she was a writer! The poor old woman had persuaded herself that she was really the author of the cannibal story. "I just dictated it," she told her friends, "and Pete Nemo put it into good clear magazine English. I always knew I could write. When I was a little girl, a Gypsy fortune-teller told me that I would win fame and fortune with a **plume!**"

A few days after Mahala's departure for Hollywood she sent a long telegram urging me to come at once. The studio stenographers did not suit her at all, and she wanted me to serve as her secretary for six weeks. She would pay me \$50 a week and traveling expenses both ways. I decided to go because I had always wanted to see Hollywood, and here was a chance to see it at somebody else's expense. The \$50 salary would have been quite satisfactory if I had not known that Mahala was pulling down \$350 a week. Whatever writing she did in Hollywood would really be done by me, and I was to be paid just one-seventh of Mahala's salary! But even this did not worry me much. After all, I reflected, it was Mahala and not I who had been captured by the cannibals.

The trip to California was a great experience for me, since I had never been west of Chicago. I had no idea that there was such rugged country out that way, and so much of it. I saw big red Maxfield Parrish mountains, and giant cacti, and Joshua trees, and honest-to-God Indians selling beadwork in the railroad stations. Since then I have made several trips West, but it's all old stuff now. My first look at California was the real thing, though—just like the gaudy booklets distributed by the dude-ranch people.

When I got to Los Angeles I wandered around all one day before calling up Mahala, and met some pleasant boys and girls. When I finally decided it was time to look up my employer I found her, not at one of the big hotels, but in an apartment house in Hollywood, a few blocks from the studio. Mahala was considerably upset. The movie people evidently did not regard her as a person of much importance. She thought that any writer who was paid \$350 a week must of necessity be a big shot, but this did not seem to be the case in picturedom. They put her in a building with a lot of other writers, and gave her a little office with her name on the door, but that was about all. She had a telephone, and a button to push whenever she wanted a stenographer, but she had not been invited to visit any of the great stars, and had not even seen the eminent Adolph Menjou. Besides, she complained, there were many writers in the building who had much larger offices than her own, and it was said that some of them were paid as much as \$1,500 a week. Poor Mahala began to feel that her literary talents were not appreciated here.

Mahala took me down to the studio next day and it was certainly a sight worth seeing. There was a great wall around the whole place, with guards and uniformed policemen everywhere. Everybody who went in had to pass a guard who sat at a desk. If this guard didn't recognize you as an employe, you had to show a little blue card from the office. If you didn't have a card, you didn't get in. The guy at the desk knew Mahala all right, and she fixed it for me to get a temporary card, so that I could at least come to work in the morning without calling her up. Mahala was accustomed to sleep late, and seldom felt like eating breakfast until about 11 o'clock.

When we reached the writers' building, Mahala sat down at her little desk and motioned me to a chair. "I've been here more than a week," she said. "I've not seen any of the officials of the company. I've not talked with anybody on the lot except one man, who seems to be a kind of grown-up office-boy. He gave me this script to read, an old one about the Civil War. He said that by reading it I could familiarize myself with the motion-



picture technique. The motion-picture technique," she added thoughtfully, "seems very different from that of the magazine story."

I looked Mahala full in the face, and grinned. But she didn't turn a hair. She was insisting, even to me, that she was familiar with the art of the magazine story! She almost convinced me, for the moment, although I knew positively that the woman had never written a magazine story in her life. But she **looked** more like a writer than any of the real writers that I have seen. The stage lost a great actress when Mahala Featherstonhaugh became a missionary's bride.

"Just sit tight," I told her after a long pause. "After all, so long as you're getting 350 smackers every week, you haven't any kick coming."

"I know, Pete, but I've always been an active woman. I'm accustomed to working, to getting something done every day. I can't just sit here twiddling my thumbs, even if I **am** paid for it."

However, poor Mahala did sit there, day in and day out, and twiddled her thumbs for nearly a month before she had any notice at all from the central office. Then a director asked her to prepare "a story-treatment of her book." Mahala had no book, and she didn't know what was meant by "story-treatment." Neither did I, but I hurried out to ask one of the Hollywood hacks about it. He told me that any sort of written material was called a book, and that a story-treatment was a sort of brief synopsis. I sat up nearly all night reducing Mahala's magazine yarn to a story treatment, and she sent it over to the big shot next morning.

Three or four days later Mahala was still twiddling her thumbs, but finally a producer phoned that she was to work the story out in more detail, in collaboration with Jeb Rinehart, one of the best scenario men on the lot. I was in Mahala's office when Jeb came over—a smart boy from New York, an ex-actor I think he was. He talked with Mahala for a few moments, and I didn't say a word. He knew that I was writing her stuff I have no idea, but he evidently did know it almost immediately. He got my address from the studio directory, and that night he called me at the hotel. He said he wanted to consult me about Mahala's "book," and I agreed to meet him the next morning.

Jeb was a very pleasant fellow, and we had two or three drinks. "I don't want to bother Mrs. Featherstonhaugh any more than is necessary," he said smoothly. "If you, as her confidential secretary, can go over the script with me and OK a few small changes, our work will be a great deal easier." I agreed to do whatever was necessary, reflecting that I could always run over and see Mahala if anything important came up. Jeb Rinehart impressed me as a clever man, but after all, this story was about cannibals in the South Seas. And it was Mahala who had been in the South Seas, and Mahala who was captured by the cannibals.

Jeb and I worked about 10 days, and then submitted the revised story to Mahala, who made a number of minor changes and took it over to the big boss. An hour later she returned in a towering rage. "He says it's no good," she cried. "He says there's no heart in it, no love interest! My God, what does the man want? Should I go to bed with the cannibal chief, or what?"

Next morning the big shot pulled Jeb off the story, but Jeb merely smiled—he had another job coming up in a few days, and didn't mind a short vacation. I went ahead and worked on the script myself, and after a few days I figured out a way to introduce a rather thin love-story into it. But just about the time I had the thing in good shape the office notified Mahala that they were going to shelve the story for the present, and that her services as a writer would no longer be required. Mahala seemed relieved rather than offended by this summary dismissal, and prepared to leave for New York at once. She wanted me to go along, but I decided to stay in Hollywood for a while, and she gave me the amount of my return ticket in cash. It seemed to me that there might be opportunities



here for a young chap with my abilities, and a talk with Jeb Rinehart confirmed me in this opinion.

I learned a lot of interesting things about Hollywood from Jeb and his friends. People often ask me "What chance has an unknown writer to sell a manuscript to the movies?" The truth is that he has no chance at all. Manuscripts come into every studio by the truck-load, but they are returned unopened. In the early days the big studios employed readers to examine every manuscript, just as publishing houses do now, but they soon found out that it wasn't worth while. They claim that only one manuscript in 30,000 has any merit at all. In fact, it is a great deal safer not to open the envelopes sent in by an unknown writer. If the studio does read a manuscript, and at any later date produces a picture which even faintly resembles anything contained in that manuscript, the author is very likely to sue the company, alleging that his story has been stolen.

The writer who wants to break into Hollywood must get his stuff published first in books and magazines—there is no other way. If you have your story in print it is always possible to get somebody in Hollywood to read it. And if the stuff has picture possibilities the producers and directors will recognize it sooner than any writer can. It is a fact that new writers are brought to Hollywood only if they have distinguished themselves in some other field of writing first. There are exceptions to this rule, but they are mighty few and far between. An actor, even if he has not been particularly successful on the stage, may possibly get a chance to do his stuff in the pictures—I wouldn't know about that. But a writer, no matter what his talents, should not come to Hollywood unless he has had a book or some magazine articles published.

At the time I was in Los Angeles the whole town was full of pretty girls. They had come from all parts of the country to be movie stars, but since most of them were just pretty girls with no acting experience at all, not one in a thousand ever got a chance to talk with anybody in authority. Beauty is a drug on the market in Hollywood, and the poor girl who comes out here just because she won a beauty-contest in Indiana is out of luck. I saw dozens of these small-town beauties working in shops and restaurants—too proud to go home and admit that they had failed to crash the pictures.

When Jeb and I were working on Mahala's script, these movie-struck girls stood outside the studio every afternoon, trying to spot somebody they knew in the crowd of picture folk that came out of the place about 4 o'clock. Most of them were trying to pick up actors whose faces they recognized, but several dazzling young creatures tied into me at one time and another. I told them that I was a writer, and had nothing to do with casting, but it made no difference. They thought that I could introduce them to somebody, who knew somebody else, who might be acquainted with a director or a producer. These girls are all convinced that if they could only meet one of the big shots he would get them a screen test at once. And every one of them believes that if she can only get a screen test, she is absolutely certain to land a good job in pictures.

My name was mentioned one day in the **Hollywood Reporter**, and shortly afterward a girl telephoned from the main office, asking if she might come over to the writers' building. The name she gave was strange to me, but she mentioned my home town and my college and my fraternity and several members of my family, and insisted that she had met me back home. So I called the doorman and told him to let her in. I waited a long time, but the girl did not show up. When I told Jeb about it, he laughed. "Just a gag to get past the gate," he said. "She saw your name in the paper, and got the dope on you somehow. Those gals will do anything to get in here. They think if they can just get inside, some big fellow will see how lovely they are and give 'em a big spot in the next epic." I learned later on that these women do get in sometimes and stay



for several days, sleeping in unused sets and dodging the cops who patrol the whole place at night. In the daytime they just mix with the crowds, eat at the commissary with the rest, and get a great kick out of seeing an occasional star in costume.

I had read many articles in the popular magazines signed by well-known actresses and actors, or even by directors and producers. It was easy to see that these stories were the work of trained writers, not movie folk. And besides, I had seen that the stars were so busy that they could not possibly find time to do all this writing, even if they had had the ability and the inclination. It was obvious that these people employed ghost-writers, and I thought perhaps I might do some of this work myself. I had given up the attempt to get a writing job in the studios proper, since I had no books or magazine articles to show; the stuff I had written, except for a few newspaper stories, had all been published over other peoples' names. But through Jeb and several similar characters with whom I had become acquainted, it seemed to me that I should be able to meet some of these movie celebrities, and do a little glamorous ghosting right here in Hollywood.

A week or two of investigation showed me that there wasn't a chance. One celebrated male star told me that all of his magazine articles were written by the publicity department of the studio, and didn't cost him a cent. What is more, in cases where the magazine paid cash for these stories, the check was mailed to him and he kept the whole amount, always being careful to send the boys who wrote the stuff a substantial present at Christmas time. "I'm under contract to the studio, and it's to their advantage to get me whatever publicity they can," he explained. "If they want articles in the magazines over my name, naturally they assign one of their boys to write 'em."

I learned later that some stars employ press-agents of their own, beside the studio staff writers, and pay these fellows out of their own pockets. One actress even wrote a book—a full-length autobiography. I was told that the ghost was paid \$10,000 for the job. "But," as the shapely lady admitted in a moment of frankness, "it only cost about \$6,000 really, because I got nearly \$4,000 in royalties!" The whole matter of ghost-writing in Hollywood was too business-like, too well organized, too **much** of a high-powered racket for a country boy like me to have any luck with. I decided to go back to New York, where an ordinary ghost had a better chance to pick up a living. I had best start right away, too, while I still had money enough to buy a ticket. Better men than I have gone hungry in Hollywood before now, and I did not wish to find myself in the crowd of moochers who hung around the studio entrance.

On the way back East I had nothing to do but think the matter over. Writers get more money in Hollywood than anywhere else on earth—there's no doubt about that. I had met men in Hollywood who were quite unknown in the world of letters, whose names had not been seen in the literary journals for years, but who were regarded as eminent writers in Hollywood. Some of these fellows were getting more than \$1,000 a week. But the only way for an outsider to break into the racket was to get some kind of recognition back East—either write a successful play, or a best-selling novel. The least that would suffice, I thought, would be a series of brilliant magazine stories.

A play was quite out of the question, as I knew nothing of the theatre, and the failure of **The Seed Grows Cold** had convinced me that I was not cut out for a novelist. But I might be able to cook up some magazine stories. I resolved to try this at the first opportunity, but in order to obtain leisure to write stories I was forced to get a job or two immediately, in order to be sure of coffee money. My Hollywood adventures had not been profitable at all. About all I had to show for my sojourn in filmdom was a loud topcoat. I was a little ashamed of that coat. It was OK in Hollywood.



where I bought it, but not at all the sort of thing I would have chosen to wear in New York.

## VII.

My first job after I returned from California was one of the strangest I ever had. It began with a letter from a well known attorney—a so-called labor lawyer comparable to the famous Clarence Darrow of Chicago. This man had been interested in Too-Frantic, and had seen both his original manuscript and my "translation" of it. Too-Frantic himself always swore that he wrote every word of the book, with no help from anybody, but the lawyer knew better, and the publisher had finally told him that I did the job.

Anyhow, this lawyer was defending a man who was almost certain to be convicted of murder. The lawyer was convinced that his client was innocent, although he had little hope of saving him. The prisoner was a revolutionist and a labor agitator, being railroaded to the chair because of his political activities. The case had attracted the attention of radical organizations and labor unions all over the country, and it was believed that a book authored by the victim would have a large sale and be a valuable piece of propaganda for the cause of liberal politics generally.

"The reason I picked you out to help this poor fellow write it," said the lawyer, "is because it's the same sort of job as Too-Frantic's book. There are plenty of radical journalists who would be glad to do the work, but I feel that a more restrained method, a literary rather than a political slant, will be more effective in this case." The job would pay only \$60 a week, he said, but if the sales went above 10,000 copies I was to get a small royalty.

I went with the lawyer to see the prisoner—let's call him Biederwolf. The poor fellow had been in jail for more than a year, and had written a lot of letters, some anarchistic speeches, and a few scraps of autobiography. The lawyer had saved typewritten copies of all these items, and thought a few interviews with Biederwolf, plus a stenographer to take down everything that was said, should furnish me with sufficient material for the book.

I saw at once that the job was not at all like my work with Too-Frantic's manuscript. Too-Frantic was a highly educated fellow, a really good writer, almost academic in his attitude toward the world. The only reason he needed me at all was his unfamiliarity with colloquial English. But this poor Biederwolf, while his spoken English was not much worse than Too-Frantic's, was not a writer at all, but a soap-box orator. A powerful, sincere, violent, absolutely fearless revolutionist, he was all for armed revolt against tyranny everywhere. But he was not an educated man, and he had none of Too-Frantic's feelings for literary values.

Biederwolf's story was long and sensational, but considerably confused in spots. He had been involved in revolutionary activities in Europe, and had been in prison many times. He had changed his name and nationality repeatedly, and was naturally anxious to protect his relatives and former associates in the old country. He would not trust me to change names and disguise characters—he tried to do this himself as he dictated the story, and this added more inconsistencies to an already difficult narrative. When Biederwolf could not think of an English term he just put in a Russian or German word, which the poor stenographer set down phonetically as best she could.

We managed to figure out most of the German later on, but the Russian words were altogether beyond our powers. A teacher of Russian whom the lawyer called in did not do well with them, either. It appears that there are many different dialects in Russia.

When Biederwolf had finally dictated himself out, he struck an



attitude and cried "The comedy is finished!" and explained in a whisper to the stenographer "That's what Christ said on the cross!"

I took the stenographer's report, the manuscript autobiography, the letters, the speeches, and a big scrapbook of newspaper clippings back to my old hangout at the Union-Square hotel. It took me nearly two months to paste this stuff together into a continuous narrative, and three months more to smooth it up into a fairly readable book. The lawyer's idea was to run an abbreviated version serially in a lot of radical newspapers and magazines, and then publish the whole thing in book form, illustrated with some fine photographs contributed by Biederwolf's fellow revolutionists.

It was not revealed to me, at the time, that the success of the project was dependent upon Biederwolf's death in the electric chair. Liberals and intellectuals in many countries had protested against Biederwolf's execution, but the lawyer believed that all these protests would be in vain. He was certain that his client was innocent of murder, but had no doubt that he would be convicted and electrocuted. Well, Biederwolf was convicted all right, and sentenced to death, but the Governor commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. This development naturally pleased Biederwolf and his friends, but it ruined the chance of any substantial sales for the book. Parts of the story were run in several magazines, but the book manuscript is still in the lawyer's safe, so far as I know. Probably it will never be published now. Well, I got \$60 a week for five months' work, but the royalties I had hoped for will never materialize.

## VIII.

Up to this time the ghost-writers I had met were little fellows like myself, but through my connection with the Biederwolf case I became acquainted with some of the higher-ups in the profession. The really big shots in the ghost-writing business work for big corporations, and call themselves "public relations counsel." When the head of a great oil company, or the president of a railroad is called upon to express himself on some question of public interest, his speech or his newspaper story is written for him by the company's "public relations department." The fellows who do this work are paid good salaries and provided with elaborate filing-systems, and secretaries, and high-powered research assistants. It is no wonder that they make a pretty good job of the great man's public utterances.

I know one fellow who was a successful lawyer before he turned to public relations work, a scholarly chap who gets a great kick out of kidding his boss and the public at the same time. This man, in his odd moments, is collecting material for a book to be entitled **The History of Ghost Writing**. I had thought of ghost-writing as a new profession, a product of modern specialized industrialism, but it appears that this is not the case.

Classical scholars have known for a long time that Julius Caesar did not write much of the famous **Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars** which used to be studied by every schoolboy. Suetonius contended that the part of **De Bello Civili** which deals with the Alexandrine war was written by Hirtius, and many experts believe that Caesar's book on the African campaign is the work of Oppius. The chapter on the Spanish war is so badly written that it could not have been done by Hirtius or Oppius, or even by Caesar himself, but must have been turned out by some obscure Roman hack who took the material from a soldier's diary. As Burton Rascoe pointed out, the famous "**Veni, vidi, vici**" was probably the inspiration of some journalist in Caesar's employ. In our own time we know that it was not General Pershing, but a certain big-mouthed reporter, who said "Lafayette, we are here!"

In medieval Europe nearly all important documents were ghosted, since



kings and military leaders were often unable to read or write. The first fictionist of modern times who is known to have used ghosts was Alexander Dumas. He made no effort to conceal the fact that there were many "secretaries" on his payroll, and it would have been physically impossible for one man to write all of the stories published over his name. None of Dumas' ghosts could write as well as Dumas himself, but there were several who turned out a fair imitation of the master's work.

In the United States, by far the most famous ghost-writer of the last century was Mark Twain, who prepared the **Memoirs** of General Ulysses S. Grant. Since that time many famous Americans, particularly actors, athletes, politicians, military leaders and others in the public eye, have employed ghost-writers. These ghosts are not always little fellows like me and my associates—some well known writers have done this sort of work. For example, Sir Harry Lauder's book **A Minstrel in France** was written by Damon Runyon and William Almon Woolf. A good job it was, too.

No less a writer than William Slavens McNutt ghosted newspaper stuff for Louis Angel Firpo, the "Wild Bull of the Pampas," when he came to this country to fight Jack Dempsey. Firpo's story of the fight, in which he knocked Dempsey clear out of the ring, is one of the finest prize-fight yarns ever written. It is in good sporting journalese, too—although poor Firpo did not know enough English to buy himself a hamburger sandwich, and probably could not write an ordinary letter even in his own language.

Christy Mathewson, famous baseball player of other days, signed hundreds of newspaper stories which were written by a reporter named Joe O'Neill. Christy wouldn't even read the stories after they were printed, and couldn't understand why some of his fellow-players seemed to "have it in for him." He did not know that his ghost had pointed out all their weaknesses in the newspaper, always over Mathewson's signature.

Babe Ruth, a more recent baseball hero, also had a ghost—perhaps two or three of them. I do not know who wrote all of Babe's newspaper stuff, but Ford Frick of the New York **Evening Journal** certainly wrote some of his newspaper stories. At one time, when Ruth lay ill and unconscious in a hospital, his signed stories continued to appear every day, with detailed descriptions of games that Babe could not have seen.

Mary Margaret McBride wrote the stuff signed by Paul Whiteman, well known band leader. Basil Woon ghosted the famous diary of Peggy Hopkins Joyce. Gaston B. Means' book about President Harding is said to have been written by May Dixon Thacker. Some of Charles A. Lindbergh's stuff was ghosted by Carlisle Macdonald. Zoe Beckley wrote the splendid magazine articles signed by the late Queen Marie of Roumania. Jack Dempsey's stories were written by Frank Menke. Helena Rubenstein's writings are the work of Mrs. L. Z. Guck.

Arthur (Bugs) Baer, Hugh Fullerton, Sinclair Lewis, Jack Lait, Clark Kinnaird, Samuel Crowther, Antoinette Donnelly, Hazel Canning, Wesley Stout, Vance Randolph, Edwin L. Meyer, F. F. Van de Water, Everett Harre, Harry Reichenbach, Hype Igoe, Robert M. Davis—all of these writers have been ghosts at some time or other, and several of them are still ghosting merrily along at the present writing. A man who should know tells me that more than 300 ghost-writers are making a good living today in New York City alone.

Well, I can't say that I ever made a good living as a ghost-writer—certainly I was never able to save any money at it. But I got along fairly well, and ate regularly, which is more than some famous poets and novelists have been able to do.



